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Chinese Parents' Hopes for their only Children: A Transition Program Case Study

Abstract

The Challenge of Growth, A significant and increasing number of international students are seeking postsecondary education in the United States. According to the Open Doors report (Institute of International Education (IIE) 2011), over academic year 2010–11, the number of international students at colleges and universities has increased by five percent. There are now 32 percent more international students studying at US colleges and universities than there were just a decade ago, for a total of 764,495 in academic year 2011–12. Although the number of international students is growing in general, China represents a country with extreme growth. According to the Open Doors data, the total number of Chinese international students was 194,029—25.4 percent of the total number of international students globally and a 23.1 percent increase compared with the previous academic year (IIE 2012).

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Education | Higher Education | International and Comparative Education

Comments

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CHINESE PARENTS' HOPES

**FOR THEIR ONLY CHILDREN:
A TRANSITION PROGRAM
CASE STUDY**

BY JIAYI HU AND DR. LINDA SERRA HAGEDORN

The Challenge of Growth

A significant and increasing number of international students are seeking postsecondary education in the United States. According to the Open Doors report (Institute of International Education (IIE) 2011), over academic year 2010–11, the number of international students at colleges and universities has increased by five percent. There are now 32 percent more international students studying at US colleges and universities than there were just a decade ago, for a total of 764,495 in academic year 2011–12. Although the number of international students is growing in general, China represents a country with extreme growth. According to the Open Doors data, the total number of Chinese international students was 194,029—25.4 percent of the total number of international students globally and a 23.1 percent increase compared with the previous academic year (IIE 2012).

Historically, China's "One Child Policy" and the cultural emphasis on education have produced a generation of parents with extremely high expectations for their only children (Stevenson and Lee 1990; Stevenson 1992; Nancy 2009). Moreover, it is commonly believed in Chinese culture that admission to a top university and receiving a "Western" education will guarantee a bright future. Among all countries around the world, the US is the most favored destination (*Inside Higher Ed* 2010). A survey conducted by China's Hurun Report found that 85 percent of wealthy Chinese parents planned to send their child to study abroad as an educational investment (*The Chronicle of Higher Education* 2010).

The increasing number of Chinese international students has produced an unspoken backlash—at best, reluctance to continue the growth and in its worst iteration, resentment. As stated in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2012), rising numbers of Chinese students have resulted in complaints that campuses may become "too Asian." Another aspect of the resentment stems from American assumptions that many Chinese cheat when it comes to testing and academic work. These issues require US bound Chinese hopefuls to look for ways to positively "stand out" among the many Chinese applicants.

Credit-Based Transition Programs (CBTP) allow high school students to take college courses and earn college credits while they are still in high school (Kleiner and Lewis 2005; Waits, Setzer and Lewis 2005; Lerner and Brand 2006). Credit-based transition programs have a long history of preparing American students for college-level work. For example, Iowa State University's Early Credit Task Force (December 2011) reported that in Fall 2010, 62 percent of entering first-year students had earned some college credits while in high school, compared to 34 percent in Fall 2000. Dual enrollment, or the practice of allowing American high school students to take college courses and to earn college credit while still in high school, has grown dramatically in the last decade (Karp and Hughes 2008; Kleiner and Lewis 2005; Waits, Setzer and Lewis 2005; Learner and Brand 2006). Recently new options for earning college credit while still in high school have been extended internationally for students planning to study in US colleges or universities.

Better Understanding of Chinese Students' Parents

Our case study included interviews of parents whose children are currently enrolled in the US Bound College Credit Program (USBC) (a generic term for programs at the Beijing Foreign Language School



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and the Second High School attached to Beijing Normal University). Our goal was to analyze three purposes via answers to three sets of questions to guide future operations and practices:

Objectives	Interview Questions
Motivations of Decision-Making	Why have you decided to send your child to study abroad? What country or countries have you considered? Why?
Measures and Actions	How did you gather information about transition programs? What sources did you use?
	How did you decide on the USBC program?
	What were the deciding factors? Did you consider tuition? Time? Location? Other?
Views/Opinions of USBC	What knowledge and skills do you expect your child to learn by attending the USBC program? To date, are you satisfied? Why or why not?
	Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your child and the USBC program?

We used these questions to investigate parents' expectations of what the American university system can provide for their only children and their dreams for the future. We analyzed why parents use a credit-based transition program to promote the dream. We also looked at costs associated with the program.

Parental Involvement Theory as a Framework

There were three components in this framework: Chinese parent involvement, international CBTPs and bachelor degree attainment. Chinese parent involvement was hypothesized to play an important role in students' international bachelor degree achievement through encouragement to augment their high school enrollment with a CBTP, such as the USBC program.

Chinese Parent Involvement

Parent involvement in education is associated with positive outcomes for Chinese students: however, in Chinese families, the role of the parent may be especially strong in areas involving academic accomplishments and success (Zhang and Carrasquillo 1995). Chinese parents typically have extremely

high educational expectations and standards for their children (Stevenson and Lee 1990; Stevenson 1992; Nancy 2009) that can be attributed to the cultural traditions that place a high value on education for self-improvement, self-esteem and family honor, and the determination to overcome discrimination by investing in education (Schneider and Lee 1990). Culturally, most students feel compelled to meet their parents' demands and academic expectations (Chang 1973; Levine and Cureton 1998; Stevenson and Lee 1990; Nancy 2009). In addition, obeying authorities and keeping parents' sacrifices in mind have long been considered proper behaviors among Chinese students (Chang 1973; Therese, Li and Zhu 2005).

International CBTP

International CBTPs provide Chinese international students with the opportunity to start American postsecondary education early with a preparation for their college-level readiness in terms of both the academic knowledge and college-level academic capabilities (i.e., English capability).

In China, international college preparation programs have been growing rapidly. In 2003, there were only two high schools operating international college preparation classes in Zhengzhou, Henan Province; in comparison, by the end of 2010, nine high schools in this province had 16 international college preparation classes in total and in the following year of 2011, 13 high schools launched 24 international college preparation classes. Moreover, Shanghai (China) Education Statistics 2010 data indicate that 51 selective high schools established 24 international college preparation classes. Across China, students who participate in international college preparation classes has accounted for more than 10 percent of the whole student population (*China Education Daily* 2012).

USBC is offered mainly in China to high school students planning on attending an American college or university. The program provides acceleration and preparation for college level work abroad. If successful, these students will enroll in American colleges with 31 units of college credit.

Degree Attainment

The construct of bachelor degree attainment includes several related cultural factors, including student self-imposed goals to obtain a foreign college degree, high self-expectations for college success, self-motivation and high achievements in academics, and pleasing parents with a huge accomplishment.

The Push-Pull Theory as a Theoretical Framework

There have been many academic studies (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Maringe and Carter 2007) that have adapted the push–pull framework proposed by Altbach (1998) to explain why people decide to study abroad. Studies have examined decision-making regarding study overseas and have also investigated patterns and motivations of student academic mobility to overseas countries. Generally speaking, students' decision making is modeled by a large number of push-pull factors.

Push factors are the economic or political factors that push students away from their home country to study overseas. Pull factors are considered those that attract the student to a specific foreign

Data Collection and Methods

The qualitative research design for our case study included a sampling of parents who had students in USBC. Data were collected during interviews using semi-structured, open-ended focus group interviews. First, the interviewer searched for general themes to be explored; then focus groups were brought together and encouraged to talk further about the subject of interest (Morgan 1997). Focus groups, rather than individuals, were treated as the primary unit of analysis (Morgan 1997; Wilkinson 1998).

We traveled to China to develop our initial research during June 2012. There are only two programs in Beijing—one at Beijing Foreign Language School and one at Second High School attached to Beijing Normal University. Prior to the trip, we contacted the sites to make arrangements for our visits and to gain access to students and parents. Program faculty were contacted and provided with an explanation of the project. At the same time, we invited parents to participate in focus groups by offering seminars on the American Education System in return for their participation. Twenty parents signed the consent letter and participated in our interviews;

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country or university, such as institutional reputation, international recognition of a program teaching quality, the availability of financial support, educational opportunities and quality, research facilities, political environment, racial/ethnic conditions, the value of the degree obtained, etc. (Guruz 2011). A study conducted at Tsinghua University (Zhang 2003) showed the factors that had the greatest influence on their decision-making were economic (29 percent), educational (27 percent), personal (15 percent), social (13 percent), cultural (nine percent) and political (seven percent). Additionally, as advocated by Hung (2009), the attraction of host countries are 1) the high quality of the teaching and learning environment 2) the opportunity for cultural exposure and experiences and 3) the improvement of career prospects at home after graduation due to international recognition of qualifications.

three groups (eight, six and six) were interviewed for 45 minutes. To provide some background regarding the parents' socioeconomic status, we include Table 1 listing participants' occupations.

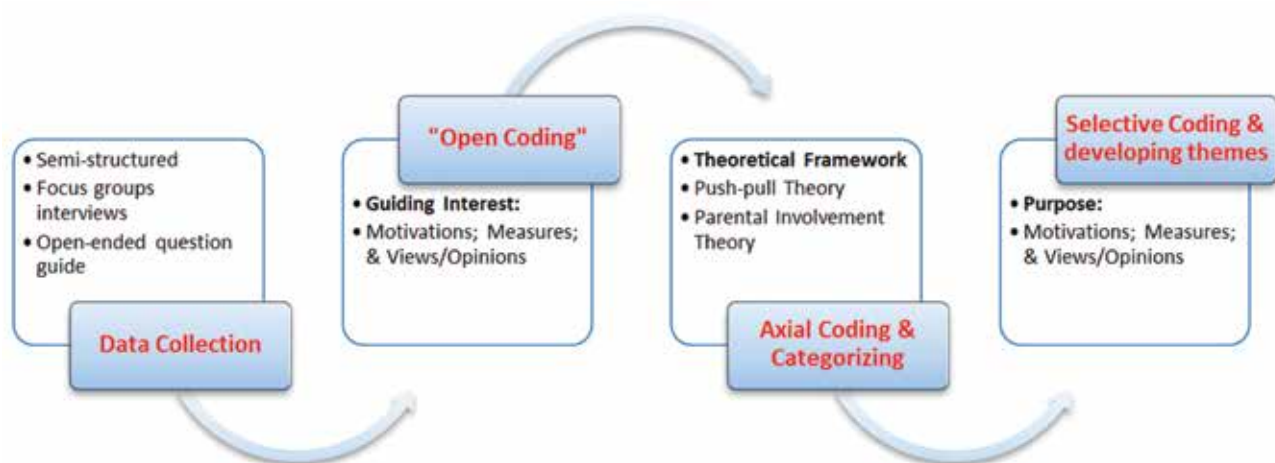
Table 1. Career Characteristics of Interviewees

Number	Careers
5	Managers
4	Faculty members
3	Stay-at-home mothers
2	Doctors
2	Accountants
2	High school teachers
2	Newspaper reporters

Procedure and Results

Data were collected using an open-ended approach with an interview question guide (see page 36 for questions). Data analysis progressed through the three major stages:

- Open coding identified and developed concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions.
- Axial coding put the data together in new ways by making connections between a category and its subcategories.
- Selective coding integrated the relative categories to form a substantive theme (Strauss and Corbin 1990).



Results

Motivations of Decision Making

Chinese parents were highly motivated to send their children abroad and recognized that it was a high-stake process. A survey conducted by China's Hurun Report found that 85 percent of well-to-do Chinese parents planned to send their children to study abroad as an educational investment (2010). Mainland Chinese parents' utilized both push and pull factors when making these decisions.

Push Factors

1) Negative aspects of National College Entrance Exam (CEE) in China. National CEE in China was described as highly competitive and conservative. On the one hand, most parents considered the Chinese CEE to be overly competitive and unfair, they preferred their children not compete; on the other hand, the CEE was the only pathway to Chinese universities. It was solely the CEE score that provided the ticket to enter universities, rather than daily high school performance. Furthermore, students were not allowed to transfer to other institutions unless they took an additional CEE. A mother said:

I am really worried about my son if he would not have a good performance at CEE... If like that, he has to be enrolled in a not

first class Chinese university and it is hard to transfer to a better one after his enrollment without another CEE score...

2) Complaints about disadvantages of Chinese higher education.

Most of the parents expressed disappointment in the Chinese higher education system for its lack of creating critical thinkers and students with high levels of creativity. Chinese teaching style, considered as cramming-oriented, was seen as implanting knowledge in the format of lectures while students passively accepted the knowledge offered in class. Students were rarely able to learn,

think and critique actively. Also important was the problem of academic plagiarism. As a father indicated:

I, myself, am a faculty member in a Chinese high-level university and I teach six credits a week. The college students in class are not motivated at learning in groups; they feel it is like a burden when they are assigned to read an academic paper critically...

Another father contributed:

I have a friend, who is doing research in a governmental department. He was criticized by his department due to his academic plagiarism. This problem is becoming a more serious problem than ever before. Such a problem is highly related to a person's honesty in his whole life. As a manager, honesty is even essential in our area when doing business. I really do not want my daughter to see a number of plagiarism issues in her study time, which will have a negative effect on her whole life.

3) The Residence Registration System in China was an essential prerequisite for taking the Chinese CEE. Many of the students lacked a Beijing Residential Card. Lacking the card, students were barred from taking the Chinese traditional College Entrance Exam (CEE) in Beijing to earn the opportunity to attend a Chinese university. This situation occurred when family members worked and lived in Beijing, but their card said they resided elsewhere

in China. Although students may attend a Beijing school, they cannot take the College Entrance Exam in Beijing. Parents working in Beijing cannot send their children back to their hometown to take CEE, therefore, parents make priority selection to send their children abroad. One mother said:

...we (the whole family) moved to Beijing in 2008, and my son started his school in Beijing since that time. But our Residence Card (the whole family) is still in our hometown rather than Beijing. Now we are facing a dilemma that on one hand my son is not allowed to take CEE in Beijing without the (residence) card, and on the other hand he cannot go back to our hometown to take the CEE...

Pull Factors

1) Parents believed study in the US would provide improved career prospects in their home country due to the international recognition of a US degree.

Getting a degree from an overseas university/college was an effective approach in increasing competitiveness in the Chinese job market. Chinese job positions often treated degrees from abroad as more valuable than local degrees. One father put it:

...I am a physical doctor and in the hospital I am looking at, applicants with overseas degrees and they get a higher priority to get a job because they are considered much better with higher level of expertise than those holding local degrees...

A mother added:

...it is the same in my company, graduates with degrees abroad in the US are having greater opportunities than the local ones to find jobs. Most of the positions prefer applicants with American degrees..." Most of the parents nodded in agreement.

Parents decided to send their kids to the US because they considered the international acceptability and recognition of American higher education as a tremendous benefit of their long-term investment.

2) Parents felt that America offered an excellent teaching and learning environment that fostered cooperation, creativity and critical thinking capability. The aim of higher education is not only to teach knowledge, but also to improve capabilities:

...China was criticized because we ask students to memorize without critical thinking, however, students are still asked to recite as a big part in class. High education should be a place to improve students' capabilities that are beneficial for their individual thinking and making judgments...

Usually, today's (Chinese) children are all one child in the family and they are very selfish, therefore, they need to learn how to cooperate with others in team work...

In addition, facing such intensive competition, they (Chinese students) should learn how to appreciate others' advantages rather than feel jealous of peers.

3) Parents valued Western society and its freedom and justice:

College time is a prime period in a person's whole life since he starts to establish his own value system. This will affect their views on everything in his future life... America is famous for its freedom and justice in its society, while China is not doing a good job. So it is a great opportunity to ask my daughter to experience during her college time.

4) Parents wanted their children to improve their English language capabilities. While studying in America, students would have the opportunity to be surrounded by English native speakers and become fluent:

America is the most developed country in the world, and it is necessary to see how the people live there...

English is a necessary and prevalent tool in new century, so young people should comprehend it.

Measures and Actions

Chinese parents frequently list the US as their top destination for study abroad (*Inside Higher Ed* 2010) and the increasing number of Chinese international students has produced some resentment at US institutions where space is already limited. Stereotypes, suspicions and debates about "true" diversity are making Chinese admission to be controversial (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*), leading to even more intense competition for Chinese students.

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Chinese high school students with American dreams must strive to “stand out” among the many Chinese applicants if they want to be competitive.

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Agents

Some parents mentioned using agents during the application process. One mother said:

A lot of my colleagues use agents to do the application for their child to apply for a top institution, and the agents will write the essays, personal statements, recommendation letter and other documents for students. However, I think it is not proper to buy an agent's service (to do) this. It seems like cheat(ing) in the application process...

Even though the students get the admission of top institutions by using agents, they are not capable to qualify for the study life there...

Even with beautiful application documents, students themselves do not own high English proficiencies... English capability is essential in their academic and social life in the US...

Chinese parents agreed that cheating practices would likely lead to post enrollment problems in American colleges.

Credit-based Transition Programs

The interviews revealed that high school teachers were integral to sharing these programs with families (14); 12 parents got the information online; eight heard from private agencies; and five from friends and family.

A surprising finding was that earning early college credit was not a key reason for program enrollment. Rather, these parents believed that enrollment in USBC would make their children stand out in the application process for selective American universities. The American dreams were specific; Ivy League was the goal:

I do not care about the transfer credits, the only purpose to participate in this program is to apply for an top university successfully...

Views and Opinions of USBC

Parents enrolled their children in the USBC for

many reasons; among the top were to increase their children's English capability and to alleviate pressures associated with the Chinese national exam. They were especially pleased that USBC hired many native English speakers, as English proficiency would be critical to their children's success. With the assurance of attending a US institution, children studied the ACT rather than the Chinese exam (perceived to be much more difficult and competitive, and much less predictive). Finally, participating in USBC was said to help students practice cooperation, critical thinking and presentation (not emphasized in the Chinese educational system). One mother said:

My daughter is good at doing presentations and isn't scared of speaking English in front of people now. She has opportunities practicing these capabilities in this program and I am very pleased about her achievements...

I agree, my daughter has strong interest in her assignments now. She is required to do research about a topic first, then write the results into a report and finally present in class. She really likes this! It is a good way to stimulate her interest in learning, promote her critical thinking capabilities, and strengthen presenting and expressing skills...

Another mother shared:

Apart from such skills those mentioned, I appreciate the ways the students study together to figure out the solution to a problem collaboratively, which helps my son to learn the ways to communicate and work together with others.

Some parents complained about the cost of the programs, a heavy burden for their families, and the value for their money. As a mother indicated:

...I paid double tuition and other fees for participating in this program [compared with other regular high school programs], but I am not satisfied with the training and service my son received...

I totally agree! My son is in this program too. But his TOEFL score is not higher than before. In fact it was even lower than that of one of his peers who has only participated in a much cheaper language-training program.

Implications

The parents wanted “the best” for their only children and believed that education in the US was the best available in the world. They believed the American higher education emphasized students’ problem solving capabilities, rather than concentrating only on the memorization of specific facts, and American society highly valued freedom and justice. They criticized the Chinese College Entrance Exam for its intensive competition and conservative aspects and cited plagiarism and inflexible teaching styles as reasons for their disappointment in Chinese higher education.

The parents wanted “the best” for their only children and believed that education in the US was the best available in the world. They believed the American Higher Education emphasized students’ problem solving capabilities, rather than concentrating only on the memorization of specific facts, and American society highly valued freedom and justice.

Parents had faith that USBC would transport children to top US universities—so much so that they were willing to forgo the CEE (meaning student could not have enrolled in Chinese universities as a back-up plan). According to *2012 College Enrollment Investigation Report* released recently by the China Education Online, in recent years, the number of high school students in China who chose to study abroad was growing rapidly, especially among undergraduates. The statistics show that since 2008 when the total national college enrollment was 10.5 million, the number of students in China who studied abroad sustained a growth rate of more than 20 percent for the following four consecutive years. Furthermore, the report predicted that this growth will continue. In terms of national college enrollment in China, the 2012 statistics indicated a total enrollment of 9.15 million students directly from high school, 1.4 million less than four years ago (Chinese Ministry of Education 2012). This was the fourth consecutive year of a downward trend since the first recorded decline in 2009.

Aiming at “standing out” among an expanding group of Chinese applicants for American universities, Chinese high school students and their parents often pursued alternatives to traditional methods of seeking acceptance, such as hiring agents to help with the process—many of these students would never make it to America without a friendly but expensive “helper” to pave the way. Education agents may have promised admission, but students can still lack college readiness—especially academic readiness—prior to their study abroad.

Chinese parents are catching onto the fact that CBTPs like USBC provide more than agents can; these programs are growing in popularity, but there are still drawbacks. According to a survey conducted by Shanghai Education Department in 2012, the average of a student’s annual expense in college preparation program was nearly 90,000–100,000 RMB (equal to \$14,516—\$16,400) in China (China Education Online 2013). The decision to study abroad is a final one. Students must forego the uniform CEE offered only once a year because they can’t prepare for both the CEE and studying abroad. Students

must still pass the course completion tests of several main high school subjects and then obtain their high school graduation



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certificate (China Qualification Verification Department, Ministry of Education in China, 2010); and they have to achieve high scores in standardized admission tests like the ACT and TOEFL. Clearly the balance of regular Chinese high school curriculum and international courses can be a lot to take on.

At the moment, the international college preparation programs in China lack a systematic integration into Chinese high school coursework (China Education Daily 2011). Moreover, the characteristics of each college preparation program are not clear to Chinese parents. Facing the huge, prosperous but disordered market of college preparation programs to study abroad, Chinese high school students planning to study abroad and their parents have many aspects to weigh when considering sending their children to the US (China JieFang Daily 2013).



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